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ABSTRACT

Unfortunately, textbooks of the elementary and junior high school levels receive very little of the honest, critical evaluation which is given trade books in children's literature. One vivid example of this fact was seen in the recent arduous but successful attempt to include "Beowul" in a fourth-grade literature text which was being compiled. That a clear, simple retelling of "Beowulf" is an especially appropriate and significant experience for a nine year old was ignored by elementary education editors considering the selection. The editors instead preferred to focus on background information, violence in the tale, word choice, comprehension questions, and reading rules. Nine year olds may be reluctant to learn facts about a 1500-year-old major piece of Anglo-Saxon literature, but they have difficulty in resisting the lure of the "Beowulf" monsters. (JM)

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BLOOD AND GORE, FENS AND FEARS: BEOWULF BATTLES THE DALE-CHALL MONSTER

Betty Jane Wagner

One cannot but welcome the humanizing interchange of ideas that are increasingly informing the field of literature for children. This is reflected in regular sessions of recent Modern Language Association meetings and the increasing number of fine published articles. In this enlightened climate we can more effectively sharpen our critical criteria as we work together to preserve the next generation's birthright to art embodied in words. Librarians, teachers, and others responsible for the purchase of trade books for children have richer resources to help them than ever before.

However, critics have concentrated only on trade books, and in so doing they have ignored the needs of the vast majority of young readers in our culture who do not have access to enough good trade books. Why is this? It is because for most children, literature is sifted through the school sieve. It is this process that breaks the whole into parts, measures the amounts carefully, tightly sequences the minutiae, and then gives them to the child, testing him (and at one remove the teacher also) by asking him to spit back the bits as they have been sifted to him, but seldom simply to eat the whole and grow. The problem is compounded by the fact that the taboo-lifting and enlightened risk-taking that has characterized children's trade book publishing in the last decade has yet to have a widespread impact on the elementary editors in the narrow offices of the textbook divisions of the major publishing houses. The outcries of parents such as those in Kanawha County, Virginia, might make one think otherwise, that indeed most modern textbooks are substantially different from their predecessors, but in actual fact only a few new elementary and junior

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language arts or reading programs are of high literary quality, and even the few that are are in danger of being lost because some of the publishers are afraid to be identified with a textbook series that is perceived in some quarters to be controversial. What is likely to happen is that even textbook editors who have taken some risks in the past few years will respond to pressure and decide to publish nothing that might offend even the most illiterate or bigoted of parents. If this happens, it will be in part because there is no countervailing humanizing climate which will praise them for their courage when they do exhibit it.

The hard fact is that textbooks receive very little honest, critical evaluation, and without this they are more subject to pressures from the least informed and most vocal critics than trade books are. Most persons outside the education profession assume the worst about textbooks and ignore the problem, leaving the textbook editors at the mercy of frightened and passionate critics. Children's textbooks are too influential to be left to this fate. They need rather to be subjected to the same rigorous criticism that has become a part of the milieu into which children's trade books are dropped. The purpose of this paper is to help correct this imbalance in critical attention.

I am going to use my recent experience with a group of elementary textbook editors at one of the largest publishing houses in the country to illustrate the thesis that these editors operate on a different set of assumptions than their counterparts in the trade divisions, and this fact accounts in large part for the poor literary quality of much of their output. I will show how not a new or controversial piece of literature, one we might expect to be avoided by a textbook publisher, but the oldest classic in our language, namely, Beowulf, fared at the "el-ed" desk. It all began when a couple of co-editors and I set about to put together an anthology of legends for fourth to sixth graders as

part of a language arts and reading program. The contract had been signed; the project was underway. We were assured our task was to put together the best collection of legends we could find. I was curious about what versions of the old story of Beowulf were available in other reading or literature textbooks, so I started to look. To my amazement, Beowulf was not in any of the recently published reading textbooks for children under twelve. I finally found a short passage from it buried in a historical survey of the English language for fourth graders, but it was clearly only illustrative material as I shall later show. By this time I was determined that our book should have a Beowulf story.

I began by reading through all the translations or retellings of Beowulf for children. Most were not as gripping as adult translations, all of which I rejected because although they were more strict, they included the poet's struggles with Christianity and paganism. These I felt strayed too far from the main tale and would detract from it for today's children. What I was looking for was a forthright retelling that was close to the spirit of the original. I found it in Dorothy Hosford's version published in the now out-of-print By His Own Might, the Battles of Beowulf.[1] Unlike the elaborate retelling by Rosemary Sutcliff[2] and others like hers, Hosford's diction is simple and effective. She captures the feel of Anglo-Saxon alliteration as in the line, "He would fain have fled to his fastness, to that den of devils,"[3] or in kennings such as "battle-boast." As in her powerful Thunder of the Gods, she captures the Norse sense of doom. Hosford gives not a hint of modern man, but instead a staunch, fearless hero of old.

However, when I found Robert Nye's retelling,[4] I chose it instead. For one thing his monsters are far grislier than hers. He went back and into the tale to create a new thing which is at once uncanny and dangerous. He captures the

primitive force of the tale. Like Hosford, he respects the value of understatement, a characteristic of Norse folk tale and mythology which is the stark and spare sinew of primitive Germanic poetry.

Although the Nye retelling is not in any sense a strict translation, we decided it did not seriously violate the spirit of the original poem. J. R. R. Tolkien made the case that the poet who wrote Beowulf was a Christian who wanted to recapture the power of a creed that by that time had vanished.[5] In our age Robert Nye is thoroughly a modern man with a spirit not given to projecting heroes, and yet, like the Beowulf poet, he longs for the clarity of an age now ancient. In his retelling is a blending of modern and primitive elements. In it I found the evocative, rhythmical prose, vivid image, and tense drama I was seeking. This version has not mere novelty, but that originality that has its birth in the truth as one person sees it, which is never quite the same as anyone else's truth. Nye's tale is a fusion of his experience, observation, and imagination. Here is a man writing with obvious delight.

This is not to say the Nye retelling is without flaws, however. Some of the modern complexity of character is at odds with the simplicity of the old epic. One part of the book that just doesn't work is the point at which he eats the witch's apples to symbolize that he is taking the bad into himself to recognize his own badness. The biggest problem in Nye's book is the final battle with the dragon for which, true to his name, he uses bees to help him conquer his last enemy. This solution is merely clever, and the force of the struggle is lost. Also Nye's description of the burial of Beowulf at the end of the book seems abrupt and weak; it is as if Nye ran out of steam.

However, the excerpt I chose -- Beowulf's battle with Grendel -- to include in the legends anthology had none of these flaws. Thus I set about to make available in textbook form for school children what was already on the shelves of libraries

and bookstores. What I did not realize was that I would face a series of battles, none of which, as far as I know, were encountered by Nye when he first published his Beowulf as a children's trade book with Hill and Wang in 1968.

My first problem was to make a case for Beowulf as an appropriate and not too mature a tale for a nine-year-old reader ant then to defend Nye's particularly evocative and vivit retelling. My expereinces are illustrative of the fact that textbook editors are far more cautious and didactic than trade book editors.

Thanks to J. R. R. Tolkien's watershed critique of 1936[6] and the critics who followed his lead, I do not need to made a case for Beowulf as a good and moving poem. Tolkien worked to rescue Beowulf from the scholars who had preceded him and had made Beowulf a quarry for historians and philologists — diggers who had left a cloud of dust he neatly cleared away, forcing all subsequent critics to look at the poem itself and to value its power. My goal is similar, only the cloud I want to clear away is a pedagogical, not a critical one.

I firmly believe that a clear, simple retelling of Beowulf is an especially appropriate and significant experience for a child as young as nine. It has adventures; a young child hungers for these. Beowulf's battles with Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon are simple, good-vs.-evil encounters full of drama, wonder and strength. In Beowulf a child finds the qualities inherent in the fresh, first-seeing of these Germanic tribes in whose language this tale was first told. The story is satisfying. In the clear triumph of good there is joy, but not the simple joy of a fairy-tale ending, for in Beowulf it isn't the triumph but his courage that matters. Courage is personified in this heroic character. Through his boastful words and brave deeds, a child sees valor in action and thus learns what it is. There is something there that is tough and real. The pace is slow; the terror, profound; the telling, terse.

Beowulf has dignity. Within the frame of the deaths of honored heroes, Scyld at the beginning and Beowulf at the end, is a tale that gives significance to a man's life, making that far-off scene vivid and symbolic. Here is a story close to the heart of the matter, material distant in time and place into which the reader can project his fears and longings. A child's mind can grasp with ease the simple and positive ninth century code of pride and courage in the face of danger; this is heightened experience at its best.

Children have not the objectivity nor the abstract concepts to enable them to think explicitly about qualities or ideas. As James Moffett pointed out, they have to depend on narrative to do the work that as adults they will be able to do with categories, generalizations, analogies, and theories. Nine-year-olds have trouble "discussing" courage; they have no trouble acting it out or identifying with a hero who is brave. In other words, in Beowulf we see what courage is before we learn to call it that.

Another limitation of immature readers is the fact that they cannot acknowledge, even to themselves, much of their thought and feeling because it is too powerful. Simple, heightened characters give them visible vessels into which to project that dangerous psychic material and deal with it. Maturity involves a movement from projection into the distant in time and place to the personal acknowledgement of emotional complexity within ourselves. For example, it is much easier to acknowledge hatred when the hated object is clearly a monster. A child's baby brother may look and act and smell like an ugly monster, but if the child tries to harm that baby, the vengeance of his mother monster can be a terror indeed. A young child brings to the battle with Grendel's mother a passion born of frustration his own mother he dare not kill, and he knows it.

When a person is frightened or frustrated he finds in repeating his story a source of relief. Richard Wilbur in his poem "Beowulf" described the need of a terrified people to repeat their tales:

> but in all was a vengeance and a strain,
> Because they lived in a land of daily harm.
> And they said the same things again and again.
>
> It was a childish country, and a child,
> Grown monstrous, so besieged them in the night
> That all their daytimes were a dream of fright
> That it would come and own them to the bone.[7]

Dreams of the night cry for tales of the day, and young dreamers hunger for the ancient wisdom in Beowulf; it is especially appropriate material for young readers.

Suppose we make a case for a piece of literature as appropriate for children and a textbook publisher accepts it. What happens to it then at the "el-ed" desk? It faces at least six probable fates: One, it may be buried in information about the piece; two, it may be shunted off to the desks of editors of books for older students on the grounds that they, and not younger children, would "understand" it; three, it may be presented with a plethora of "comprehension" questions to plague the reader; four, it may be surrounded by exhortations to the reader to pay attention to it; five, it may be bowdlerized because of its content or diction; or, six, it may be "simplified" or even eliminated on the basis of the Dale-Chall formula. If I had not recently had to go to battle to avoid most of these fates for literature I wanted to include in elementary reading textbooks, I would not be sure of myself in presenting this thesis. Unfortunately, I think my experience is fairly typical of writers and anthologizers who work with elementary textbook editors, and this is why I share it with you.

For a good example of burying Beowulf in information, let's look at the only excerpt from Beowulf that I found in a reading or language textbook for children under twelve. This excerpt is in Scott Foresman's fourth-grade Language and How to

Use It,[8] an English language book. What this book has is a short condensation of the fight with Grendel taken from Gladys Schmitt's The Heroic Deeds of Beowulf. This excerpt is clearly not presented as literature, but as an illustration of what the authors are presenting: a lot of information about the beginnings of the English language. Now, I am not saying that historical information is not important. I know that the presentation of information is often a textbook's raison d'être. What concerns me is the all too frequent substitution of information about for experience with literature. No nine-year-old I know is hungry to hear that Beowulf is the major piece of Anglo-Saxon literature written in a language spoken 1500 years ago, but few children can resist the lure of those monsters. In Language and How to Use It, a one-page excerpt from Beowulf is preceded by three and a half pages of information about this literature and the language it was written in, and is followed by a set of comprehension questions. What the child learns is this: Beowulf is something important to learn about, something he or she should know, something the teacher values and that he better learn to value as well. Gone is the Beowulf who, as Tolkien put it, "must ever call with a profound appeal -- until the dragon comes."[9] For the newly literate, Beowulf has been reduced to a snippit and buried in a pit of information.

Textbooks like Language and How to Use It cater to those Tolkien characterizes as "seeking knowledge about, and ready-made judgments upon, works which they have not the time, nor (often enough) the desire, to know at first hand."[10] Adults tend to be the ones who seek knowledge, children, on the other hand, tend to bring time -- time to savor, to live through over and over, and to respond to with much more than their minds. They come with antenna stretched out for experience, feelers which can be crushed by a heavy load of information.

Not only has Beowulf fared badly; even dragons have not withstood pedagogy. Now a dragon is a formidable thing, not easy to destroy. The only way to vanquish him is to present him not in a tale, but as information. For example, in Harper & Row's Coming to Crossroads children learn:

> Stories of dragons can be found in nearly every part of the world, but their appearance and temperament differ greatly...
>
> The dragon described in European literature was usually evil. He looked somewhat like a huge scaly lizard. Although he had wings, he seldom flew.//

No earth rumbles at his step; no pale reader quails; this dragon has been laid out as just another dull something that must be learned.

Burying Beowulf and dragons under information about them is not the only or even the worst thing that happens at the textbook editor's desk, however. Epic literature even more frequently gets set aside until the child is older and supposedly more ready to respond. When I was trying to get Beowulf and other material into anthologies for fourth graders, I engaged in a three-year correspondence with a series of editors; the complexity of this correspondence I can never hope to recreate for you. I remember a steady stream of letters beginning: "You don't know me, but I am the new editor of your legends book. Will you kindly bring me up-to-date on your concern about. . ."

Once I brought the new editor up-to-date, the rejections began again. One editor admonished me that Beowulf would not be suitable for children of this age

because they would not be able to understand the symbolism involved. Now who really understands the symbolism of a monster? When the day comes that we understand that monster, the only thing we'll know is this: we are stumbling into its lair. For stories to work symbolically, a child does not need to be old enough to "understand" or to talk about what the symbols mean. Into his awareness unbidden and without belabored teaching will stalk a symbol, blatantly belching its fire of significance.

If Beowulf does get postponed until the child is older, say, in junior high school, then how does it fare in the textbooks there? At this age children are supposedly old enough to "understand" the symbolism, and indeed excerpts from Beowulf do appear in at least four literature anthologies of major publishers.[12] The editors are still worried, however; in order to be sure that Beowulf gets understood, they couch each excerpt in introductory material, comprehension questions with answers in an overwritten Teacher's Guide, and wooden "applications to today." I'll give you only a few examples which I assure you are depressingly typical.

In the Ginn junior high textbook, To Turn a Stone, a short retelling of Beowulf by Dorothy Hosford is followed by questions such as these:

Question: "How do we know that the story of Beowulf is very old?"[13]

Answer: (in the Teacher's Guide) "The most important clue is the inclusion of a dragon in the story. Dragons usually appear only in the very old stories." (What about the Loch Ness monster, or the dragon in The Hobbit.

Question: "Why does Beowulf insist on fighting the dragon alone?"

Answer: "In those early times, great emphasis was placed on man's achieving glory before he died." (Is this no longer the case?) "He had courage."[14] (It's good that answer was handy in the Teacher's Guide; otherwise he or she might never have figured that out!)

In another junior high literature anthology, Perception, Themes in Literature, the excellent retelling of Ian Serraillier's Beowulf is followed by a dull-witted "CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING" section. First, the student is gripped by such lines as:

> Thereafter, from dark lake and dripping caves
> Night after night over the misty moor
> Came Grendel, gross and grim, famished for flesh.[15]

or

> Then Grendel wailed from his sound, his shriek of pain
> Roused the Danes in their hiding and shivered to the stars.[16]

Then comes the application, one of the worst examples of misplaced pedagogy I have yet to see:

> At first the story seems remote from the life we live today. But as one's ideas about the story simmer, startling thoughts bubble to the surface. Many American cities are faced with the same kind of problems as was Hrothgar's Great Hall, Heorot. Beautiful parks are plagued by roving gangs who torment and rob the people who walk through them. Certain streets are no longer safe for an individual to walk alone. Perhaps we need a dragon fighter like Beowulf to kill the menaces lurking in the parks and streets of our cities.[17]

Instead of providing catharsis, this literature is to stir us to action, is that it? The application of today continues. After the episode of Beowulf killing Grendel's mother we have this bit of wisdom, ringing with the morality of John Foster Dulles' foreign policy:

> Resting from the tremendous fight with Grendel, Beowulf awakes to the news that there is a new monster to be slain, Grendel's mother. Even today this is true - heroes today fight and kill the dragons called war, poverty, interracial strife, corruption only to find that they have sprung up in another spot of the world and must be fought all over again.[18]

Perception also has its comprehension questions. Here's one: "Beowulf is described as 'the mildest and mightiest of men'; is this an unbelievable combination of traits for a real hero?"[19] In the Teacher's Resource Guide, another one obviously written for morons, the teacher is told. "Answers may vary."[20]

Another problem for any piece of literature that makes its way into a reading textbook is that it is likely to be surrounded by heavy-handed advice on how to improve reading skill. In my vain search for Beowulf in elementary reading textbooks, I came across numerous exhortations for the reader. I can only assume that the textbook writers fear that children will stop trying to read unless the process itself is dwelt upon assiduously. Here is a typical advice all in capitals - perhaps to keep the reader awake:

> Follow these rules for better reading.
> 1. KEEP YOUR MIND ON WHAT YOU ARE READING.
> 2. KNOW WHY YOU READ.
> 3. KNOW THE MEANING OF EVERY WORD.
> 4. READ TO UNDERSTAND RELATIONSHIPS.
> 5. BUILD MENTAL PICTURES AS YOU READ.
> 6. RECOGNIZE IMPORTANT DETAILS.2/

Most fourth graders prefer real dragons to this and while they are stalking across the page, the readers do not need to remind themselves to "build mental pictures." Try to build a "mental picture" of that list of exhortations, if you will!

My co-editors and I finally convinced our textbook editors that Beowulf was indeed appropriate for fourth grade children, that we did not want a snippet of it buried in information nor followed by comprehension questions or exhortations to read it carefully. What then? Little did I realize that the biggest battle was still ahead of me, a battle against bowdlerizing the excerpt of Nye's that I had chosen. This should not have surprised me for bowdlerizing goes hand-in-hand with heavy didacticism.

My editors did not object to the fact that the Nye retelling is just that -- a retelling and not a strict translation. What they objected to was that the Nye version was "particularly gory and particularly explicit in its language." That it is, I agree. One editor wrote, "In an age when many of us are condemning the increasing violence shown on TV and in magazines, I wonder if we need to add a particularly violent version of Beowulf to the scene." One of

my coeditors tried to explain why clearly fantastic violence could be a powerful antidote and way of coping with real violence; how a story of the death of a gruesome, evil monster might reassure us that right will somehow win and that some of the evil that lurks about the monster will go with it to its grave. As for myself, I took very seriously the editor's concern that this was a violent excerpt, and I proceeded to edit it rather than lose it entirely. The editor also noted that some of the descriptive material about Unferth was offensive, so, hard-pressed to get even a bowdlerized version in rather than none at all, I decided to take out of the Nye version two parts that I divined might be the ones which were the most unsavory for the editor. I couldn't bring myself to soften the horror of Beowulf's victory over Grendel, so I left in this:

> Grendel ... shook his arm about and dashed it against the well. Beowulf, badly bruised, refused to relinquish his hold. When shaking did not work, and banging did not work, Grendel tried jerking his arm. But Beowulf wound his legs around a pillar. He took the full force of the monster's pull - and still held on.
>
> There was a fearful snapping of bones and tearing of sinew and muscles.
>
> Then hot stinking blood fountained everywhere.
>
> Beowulf had pulled Grendel's arm out of its socket!
>
> The monster howled. It was a pandemonium of pain, as though all the men he had eaten cried out too.[22]

Then I left out these lines:

> He dragged himself along the ivory floor, blood pumping from his wound with each fierce beat of his angry heart. He knew he must die from loss of blood.[23]

The rest of the violence remained unchanged, and that deletion alone made the excerpt sufficiently "unviolent." Clearly it was the gore on the floor, not the violent act that was offensive.

To mitigate the ugliness of Unferth I cut out this particularly descriptive, if gross, paragraph about what Unferth did as he waited in Herot that night that Grendel was to come:

> Unferth began gnawing at his fingernails. They tasted of dirt and where he had been poking at his boil. Unferth hated the taste of himself, but he had to have it.[24]

I left in the lines:

> .....He smiled to himself in the dark. He had stopped drinking. He was afraid, but his fear fascinated him. His bladder ached; he wanted to make water; but he did not dare go out in the night to do so. He twisted about on the hard, uncomfortable step. He could feel the sweat trickling out of his hair.[25]

I wanted to leave in that description because of the way Unferth's fear functions to heighten the suspense and because this mirrors a sensory experience common to children. For the editor I decided to omit this description of one event in the tale that is actually closer to a child's experience than to an adult's:

> Unferth's blood ran cold. He cowered into shadow. He felt his own water leaving down his leg, sore and warm and sticky.[26]

My edited version with only these three omissions was accepted. It was then I wrote the editor that it would have been easier for me if I had known beforehand that it was blood and urination and not violence that worried him. I reminded him that the edited version of Beowulf was quite as violent as before.

The "reason" most commonly given for proposing bowdlerizations of excerpts I tried to get into the anthologies I was doing was that offensive material would not get by textbook adoption committees, ogres that breathe closely down the necks of most textbook editors. Excerpts from children's books that had evidently faced no flack in the children's trade book offices of, in some cases, even the same publishing house, were considered controversial material for textbooks.

In the end we won the Beowulf bowdlerizing battle, but no thanks to me and my efforts to compromise. My two co-editors, fierce, uncompromising men for whom I have a high regard, simply refused to go along with this watering down (no pun intended); one of them temporarily quit his association with the publisher; the other wrote a scathing letter expressing his despair over this event and numerous

others of the same kind:

> "I was becoming increasingly excited by the notion that a major publisher might be willing to take the risk of moving into new territory in school texts, that something might happen that would demonstrate to kids that books with titles like Adventures in Literature might have one or two honest-to-God adventures instead of the pablum they have come to expect."

This same co-editor warned the publisher of this fact:

> "The trend in selection committees is toward more, not less, teacher power. I think this is happening because it is becoming increasingly harder to interest kids in books for something like the reasons McLuhan suggests, and teachers are not about to let others select books they cannot use, and because people coming into teaching these days have more guts than did their counterparts even a decade ago. Yes, jobs are scarce, but this has led to the hiring of tougher people coming out of a generation more apt to rebel to begin with."[27]

We also reminded the publisher of the fact that there is a widespread dissatisfaction with literature textbooks; many teachers are choosing to forget them altogether and use trade books instead in their classrooms. After a long negotiation, the publisher backed down; we won our case. The Beowulf excerpt got into our anthology just as Robert Nye had written it.

Before this final victory, however, there was one more monster to face: the Dale-Chall test. Too many literature lovers don't know enough about this test, which is a formula for determining just what grade level a given story or poem is for. Whatever escapes the net of inappropriate content or language is finally filtered through the Dale-Chall tests to find out which readers are going to have access to a particular piece of literature.

For young readers the Dale-Chall monster blocks access to the hoard of words at the base of our civilization. By effecting the pouring-out of black smoke in the form of dull and stupid limited vocabulary basal readers, readability tests keep children away from the literature they long for. Little exiles from the land that never was, they go to books for live wisdom and find only the words of Edgar Dale's list tied up in short sentences. Dale's list doesn't include words like

"fen", "bleak", or "sere", but I contend that a young reader of these words in Nye's retelling doesn't have a problem, even if he can't "define" the words:

> The fen was wild and waste. It stretched as far as the eye could see. The sky over it was grey. The sun was black and sere. It was a dead land.[28]

The child wades fearlessly into that fen in search of Grendel's mother, and Dale and Chall only keep him out of the gate of the "el-ed" desk.

Edgar Dale and Jeanne S. Chall assumed that short sentences were easy and long sentences were hard. Yet, here's a 51-word sentence from Nye's Beowulf, a description of Grendel's mother, that I cannot imagine even a four-year-old would find difficult:

> It was shaped like a snake, a snake as black as jet, long and fat and hissing, but it moved across the marshy ground faster than any snake that ever was, because it had tentacles that pulled it through the mud as quick and slick as a knife going through butter.[29]

The Dale-Chall formula, first published in the Educational Research Bulletin in 1948[30] and revised ten years later, is still used by textbook editors who are thus relieved of the arduous task of sharpening their own tools of literary criticism, a task that should be a prerequisite for a position of such widesweeping power. The revised Dale-Chall tests are the easy-to-apply way of making hard decisions about which children can read what. All you have to do is this: For a sample of 100 words in a piece of writing, count all those words that are not on the Dale list, a list made up of words most commonly found in basal readers, and you come out with the Dale score. Then you count up the number of sentences in the sample and enter that into the computation. You don't need to think, you just count and apply the formula. The Dale score is entered on the table from the left column; the number of sentences is entered from the top, and at the intersection of the two columns, just as on a mileage chart, the two scores meet, and, eureka!, you find a grade level. Then all you have to do is run out and find all the children with, say, a 4.6 grade level reading score on standardized tests

and give them, and them only, this piece of literature. Isn't that simple? The Nye translation of Beowulf came out at a 7.6 grade level according to the Dale-Chall formula.

Dale-Chall is not the only test for grade level, however. There is the SMOG readability formula, which is computed on the square root of the number of words of three or more syllables in thirty selected sentences; there is the Fry Graph, which is computed on the average number of syllables and the average number of sentences per 100 words. Also, looming large on the horizon are the new Learner Verification Systems such as the one developed this past year by the California State Department of Education. These systems determine not only the appropriate grade level of materials but the performance capability of textbooks to effect measurable behavioral changes. The potential of this new test for deadening experience with true literature can easily be imagined.

What is critical, of course, is not vocabulary, sentence length, number of syllables, or measurable behavioral change, but whether a child cares to know about what he is reading. Children hunger for quality in writing, just as adults do. In order to find material children would like to read, I asked dozens of youngsters to read pieces I liked and tell me whether they liked them or not, and whether they found them hard to read, too easy, or just right.

In the hands of real nine-year-olds and not those mythical creatures of the Dale-Chall tests, Beowulf triumphed because Beowulf, the epic, is simple despite its archaic words and long sentences, simple because the issues are clear, simple because the battle is pure. It is not unlike the young man Beowulf himself as Nye describes him at the time he arrives at Hrothgar's hall vowing to kill the monster:

> Beowulf sat down on the steps by the king's throne. His manner was relaxed and easy. Hrothgar could not help liking this plain young man - there was such an air of simplicity about him. He shuddered and touched the scars on his own face - livid marks made by Grendel's claws - as he thought what the monster would do to that simplicity.[31]

It is precisely that simplicity we must preserve. All art at bottom projects simplicity; and yet like Beowulf beguiles with its power.

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FOOTNOTES

1. (New York: Henry Holt, & Co., 1947,)

2. Beowulf (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1962).

3. Hosford, p. 18.

4. Robert Nye, Beowulf, A New Telling (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968).

5. J. R. R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," Proceedings of the British Academy, XXII (Oxford University Press, 1936), pp. 245-95; reprinted in The Beowulf Poet, A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Donald K. Fry (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968).

6. Tolkien, op. cit.

7. Richard Wilbur, "Beowulf," Ceremony and Other Poems (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.; London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1948, 1949, 1950), pp. 36-37; reprinted in The Beowulf Poet, A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Donald K. Fry (Englesood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), p. 66.

8. Andrew Schiller, Marion Monroe, Ralph Nichols, William Jenkins, and Charlotte Huck, eds., Language and How to Use It, Grade Four (Glenview, Illinois: Scott Foresman and Company, 1969, 1967), pp. 9-14.

9. Tolkien, p. 41.

10. Tolkien, p. 18.

11. Eldonna L. Evertts and Byron H. VanRoekel, eds., Coming to Crossroads (New York: Harper & Row, 1972, 1966), p. 129.

12. John E. Brewton, Babette Lemon, and Marie Ernst, New Horizons Through Reading and Literature (River Forest, Illinois: Laidlaw Bros., 1962). G. Robert Carlsen, Anthony Tovatt, Ruth Christoffer Carlsen, and Patricia O. Tovatt, Perception, Themes in Literature (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1969). Theodore Clymer, Doris Gates, Marion L'Amoreaux, Helen Wardenberg, To Turn a Stone, "Boston: Ginn and Company, 1973, 1970). Elizabeth C. O'Daly and Egbert W. Nieman, Adventures for Readers, Book 1 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968).

13. Theodore Clymer and Helen Wardenberg, eds., To Turn a Stone Teacher's Guide (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1973, 1970), p. 18.

14. Clymer and Wardenberg, p. 18.

15. Carlsen, et. al., p. 419.

16. Carlsen, et. al., p. 421.

17. Carlsen, et. al., p. 433.

18. Carlsen, et. al., p. 437.

19. Carlsen, et. al., p. 443.

20. Carlsen, et. al., Perception, Themes in Literature Teacher's Resource Guide (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1969), p. 136.

21. Daisy M. Jones and J. Louis Cooper, From Codes to Captains (New York: Harper & Row, 1964, 1963, 1960), p. 366.

22. Nye, pp. 49, 50, and 51.

23. Nye, p. 51.

24. Nye, p. 43.

25. Nye, p. 42.

26. Nye, p. 43.

27. Robert Pierce, letter, February 22, 1972.

28. Nye, p. 70.

29. Nye, p. 60.

30. Edgar Dale and Jeanne S. Chall, "A Formula for Predicting Readability: Instructions," Educational Research Bulletin, 27 (1948), pp. 37-54.

31. Nye, p. 33.